

## Charter Students Arrive with Needs, Old Habits

By  
Janet Stoeppelmann

The following is a letter to the editor in response to a previous letter suggesting that charter schools are accepting only the better students while discouraging special education and low income students. Both letters originally appeared in the East Valley Tribune in April, 2001, and this is reprinted with permission from the author.

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This is in answer to Maurice Wolfthal's letter of April 8th claiming that charter schools "stack the deck" for test results. As charter school directors who are daily in the trenches, we wonder what qualifies Mr. Wolfthal to arrive at such an opinion. If what he says were true, our jobs would be a snap. As it is, every student we get (from district public schools and other charters as well) is below level in one or more subjects and sometimes far below grade level in more than one academic discipline. Most are poor or non-readers. We can vouch for the fact that many so-called 3rd and 4th graders we have enrolled could not read or read poorly (in spite of special-ed classes, in some instances).

In addition to this stark reality, most children have to be "de-programmed" when they come to us. That is, their conduct and study habits are geared toward infantilism and ineffectual academic learning styles ("We received candy when we got a correct answer at our *other* school," or "Oh, you *meant* it when you said the book report was due in five days," or "Why do we have to wear these uniforms? Purple hair and baggy pants are *cool!*") Also, when a child is one in thirty-five, bullying may be rampant and we have to emphasize that bullying will not be tolerated.

When children are used to jumping around from so-called "learning station" to "learning station" every ten minutes, this is not exactly conducive to development of strong reasoning powers or thoughtful enquiry. Therefore, we have to re-program them to question, take larger blocks of time in which to think, frame their questions and answers in intelligible written language, and develop effective study and work habits as well as organizational skills.

When, by dint of blood, sweat and tears, we have to teach children to read and write as late as ages eight-twelve and their test scores still go up (as ours have), we deserve credit for doing something right. When all children are reading at or above grade level by the end of the year, we have to be doing something right. And I would remind Mr. Wolfthal, that we do this in addition to teaching, not *to* the test, but real skills like mathematics, history, geography and science.

We don't know which charter schools he's citing when he accuses charters of "choosing" students. We certainly do not pick and choose students and we don't know of any charters who do. In fact we have gone out of our way to take children who needed extra

help. We do have standards, however, and parents know that their children must adhere to homework, dress and conduct policies when they enroll their child at our school. The district public schools could do the same if they wanted to - make the student and parents as accountable as the schools must be.

Mr. Wolfthal needs to give credit where credit is due instead of talking about something he has obviously not experienced first-hand. Charter schools are not "elitist". We are dedicated to the principle of a democratic education and that means *all* children must be literate, no matter what their race, ethnicity, or socio-economic background is. No more excuses!

Janet Stoeppelmann  
East Valley Academy (K-6)  
Mesa, Arizona